

BAY CIRCUIT TRAIL

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 JANE KEIRSTEAD, a member of the Nashoba Valley Trails Coalition

Bay Circuit Trail: 200-mile link around Boston

Bay Circuit Trail: a labor of love linking us with beaches, forests

By Diana Brown
 GLOBE CORRESPONDENT

Alan French climbed the rocky path, past majestic evergreens on the steep slope of Prospect Hill, an old ski mountain in Rowley that commands sweeping views of the Atlantic Ocean and Plum Island in Newburyport.

"This is a success story," said the 65-year-old Andover resident as he looked below at the 80-acre property. "If it hadn't been for the Bay Circuit Trail ... this might be condos today."

From the sandy shores of Bay Farm in Kingston

and Duxbury, along cranberry bogs in East Bridgewater, over wooded trails in Walpole, Sherborn, Bedford, and Boxford and across boardwalks in swamps in Andover, the Bay Circuit Trail and Greenway snakes across 200 miles of suburban terrain around Boston.

If the entire trail is ready by 2000 as planned, it would connect peaceful marshes to bustling urban centers to virgin forests to spectacular beaches in more than 30 communities.

"It's an incredible thing. You could walk from the North Shore to the South Shore," said Peter Forbes, TRAIL, Page 4

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vice president and regional director of the Trust for Public Lands, a private, national organization, and a Bay Circuit supporter.

About 140 miles of trails and open space have already been marked and open to the public, most of it through state parks and local conservation trails.

There are about 60 miles of significant gaps remaining, in Ipswich, Hamilton, Rowley, Lowell, Tewksbury, Billerica, Chelmsford, Concord, Carlisle, Sudbury, Southborough, Medfield, Sharon, Easton, West Bridgewater, East Bridgewater, Halifax, Hanson, Pembroke, and Kingston.

There is only one similar trail: the Bay Area Ridge Trail, a 400-mile path along San Francisco Bay that is half completed. "That has been one of our cousins," said Charles Tracy, Massachusetts director of rivers and trails for the National Park Service and another Bay Circuit supporter.

If completed, the Bay Circuit would be a continuous passage through natural settings. In Framingham, for example, it would lead hikers from the harried corridors of Route 9 and the Massachusetts Turnpike to tranquil Callahan State Park.

The land along some rail lines could become bike and walking paths on the Bay Circuit in Ipswich, Rowley, Newburyport, Billerica, Lowell, Chelmsford, Westford, Carlisle, Acton, Andover, Tewksbury, Wayland, Sudbury, Easton, and the Bridgewater.

A pathway of quiet

All along the trail there is respite from traffic and noise. In Ashland, a walk down busy Pond Road, away from the Pond Plaza shopping mall, the trail leads to a small entrance between a road barrier.

There, the trail heads downhill beside imposing birch trees and a carpet of ferns. An archway of Concord grapes stretches over the path, and black-eyed Susans grow wild across the fields. The smell of car exhaust and the sound of motors fade gradually, replaced by the calls of birds and the rustle of squirrels in the underbrush.

French, chairman of the Bay Circuit Alliance, envisions a gentle path that would not need much preparation or maps to navigate. But he says the trail will need more consistent markers so it is easier to follow.

"Our goal is to have a network of trails that people can do on their own," said French, under whose leadership the all-volunteer Alliance is trying to close the gaps in the

trail, working with local committees and state environmental agencies.

"We haven't achieved that in all aspects," said French, who in 1994 walked the trail in an unusually fast 12 days, camping along the way.

Advocates are struggling to win recognition for the Bay Circuit Trail. Many people do not know what it is or that it is located close to their neighborhoods.

"If we want people to care about this, then we need to make them aware and show them the joys it can bring," French said.

As leaves begin changing, temperatures drop, and bugs retreat for winter, French believes this is the optimal season to take in the trail. "The fall is just gorgeous," he said.

Trouble spots along the way

The Bay Circuit was conceived in the 1930s as an outer Emerald Necklace, mirroring the crescent of parkland in Boston and linking open spaces by a scenic road and footpath.

There wasn't much progress until 1984, when the state Department of Environmental Management gave \$3.25 million for Bay Circuit land acquisition and municipal planning grants so towns could update their open space plans to include Bay Circuit trails and greenways.

The Bay Circuit Alliance was formed in 1990, a private, nonprofit group with the goal of completing the trail by 2000. The alliance shifted the focus from roads toward trails and greenways, and it aggressively pursued land purchases and negotiated agreements with private landowners for rights of way or contracts with the state or private land trusts to include land in the Bay Circuit.

Larry Eliot is son of the late Charles Eliot II, one of the original Bay Circuit visionaries and director of the National Resources Planning Board, a federally funded agency under President Franklin Roosevelt, and the Trustees of Reservations.

Eliot said his father would not necessarily be pleased with the trail as it is evolving today. "He would be saying, 'It shouldn't be a trail. It should be a green space,'" said the younger Eliot.

He is carrying on his father's work by trying to persuade his neighbors on Argilla Road in Ipswich to allow the trail to cross their property at the beginning of the trail. The alliance also needs to raise an unspecified amount of money to build boardwalks across the marshes in Ipswich.

French is trying to honor Charles Eliot's vision of protecting open space. French estimates that about 70 percent of the circuit is green space, with Prospect Hill being one of the jewels in the circuit's crown. By getting public and private agencies to acquire the hill in 1995, the alliance protected threatened open space and linked Rowley and Lowell with off-road trails.

In Tewksbury and Medfield, French and local trail supporters are negotiating with officials to allow part of the trail to be routed through state hospital land.

State Representative James R. Miceli, a Wilmington Democrat, is optimistic that the trail will be ready in Tewksbury by next year. "I haven't heard any opposition," said Miceli, who has filed several bills during his 20 years in the Legislature to protect the 900 acres of farmland around Tewksbury State Hospital for conservation and recreation.

French and other Bay Circuit supporters are also negotiating with cranberry growers on the South Shore who worry that trekkers could

damage their crops. They are also concerned about liability and dangers to trekkers from pesticides growers spray in early summer. The proposed section of trail would cross bogs owned by 12 growers.

Jack Angley - the outgoing president of the Cape Cod Cranberry Growers Association, which represents 500 farmers - believes that such issues can be dealt with and says that farmers could benefit from having hikers learn about the cranberry business.

"Maybe there is more good to be gained from this than bad," Angley said. "I see it as a very positive program. We are one of the few groups that save open space, so I see the Bay Circuit Alliance as potential allies on that. There is some common ground."

One of the more troublesome problems facing completion of the trail are the rail lines - some active, some abandoned.

The Massachusetts Bay Transportation Authority is reconnecting commuter railways from Ipswich to Newburyport. The Bay Circuit Alliance asked the authority to build about \$5 million in walking and bike trail bridges across the Rowley and Parker rivers and adjacent to three miles of railroad. The request was refused because of safety and liability concerns, so the alliance is looking into building its own bridges.

"In other parts of the country, there are trails with rails," said state Senator Bruce E. Tarr (R-Gloucester), who is working with the alliance to find some compromise.

In the Merrimack Valley, there has been a longstanding effort to create the Bruce Freeman Bikepath along an abandoned 11-mile rail line in Lowell, Chelmsford, Westford, and Acton. The path is named for a late Chelmsford legislator.

"It's a beautiful corridor," said Jane Keirstead, a member of the Nashoba Valley Trails Coalition, which is working to create the trail, possibly by next year. "I see it as a nice, attractive place to walk, bike, and rollerblade off roads."

Protectors of the trail

As the Bay Circuit crosses pastures, woodlands, marshes, and roadways, several local caretakers have come along to groom, prune and mark it.

Since 1992, Dick Watkins, 73, of Danvers, has walked, cleared, and marked many sections of the Bay Circuit from Newbury to Kingston.

Despite having had a heart attack and bypass surgery, Watkins gets out on the trail as much as he can, while his wife Ginny waits for him in the car.

In Sherborn, Arthur Schnure walks the trail weekly, particularly through Rocky Narrows Reservation, a 220 acre sanctuary that overlooks the Charles River and Medfield.

"Walking by yourself is the best way to see and hear everything," said Schnure, who has worked to close the gaps in Ashland, Walpole, Medfield, and East Bridgewater.

In Kingston, Pine DuBois stepped in to save Bay Farm before bulldozers started working the land for seven house lots in 1987.

With help from the Trust for Public Lands and the state Department of Environmental Management in 1990, the Bay Farm land overlooking Kingston Bay and the Duxbury Coast was bought and now serves as the Bay Circuit's South Shore terminus.

"The Bay Circuit Trail - as great an idea as it is - is still not that well known," DuBois said. "People are generally very interested in finding out where open spaces are, and with the incredible development down here, people will want to know more."

Tom Horth became interested in the trail when he found it traversed Hewlett Packard's property in Andover, where he worked before his retirement. His hobby now is to map several sections of the trail.

Even charting trails under power lines and across capped landfills would suffice in areas where not much conservation land is left, Horth said while walking the trail near Fawn Lake in Bedford. "In this overcrowded world, you have to take space where you can."

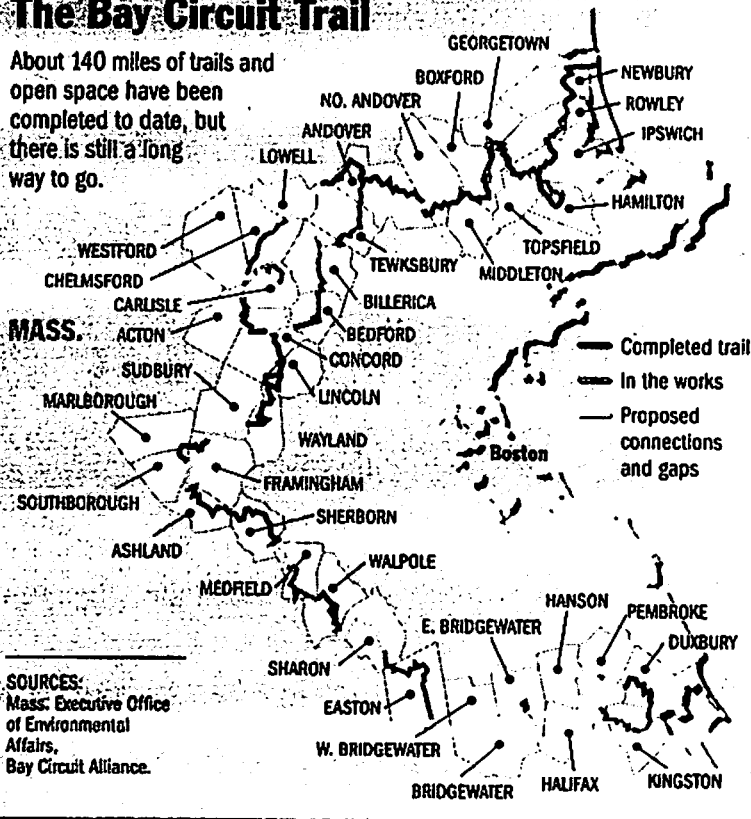
"One of the things really fighting the Bay Circuit is development," he said. "It is just going like mad. Everything is getting built up. If we don't hurry up and get the Bay Circuit Trail done, there won't be any land left."

Bay Circuit Trail

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The Bay Circuit Trail

About 140 miles of trails and open space have been completed to date, but there is still a long way to go.



SOURCES:
Mass. Executive Office
of Environmental
Affairs,
Bay Circuit Alliance.

GLOBE STAFF GRAPHIC / DAVID L. SCHUTZ

Points of interest along the trail

Here are some notable places along the Bay Circuit Trail in South Weekly territory:

■ The southern tier of the Bay Circuit Trail has only three sections in Walpole, East Bridgewater, and Duxbury that are marked and open to the public.

To complete the trail by 2000 as planned, several proposals must be approved in order for more crossings to go through Sharon, Easton, West Bridgewater, East Bridgewater, Hanson, Pembroke, and Kingston.

Among the potential jewels on the trail could be Moose Hill, Massachusetts Audubon Society's sanctuary, which offers sweeping views of Sharon and Walpole from what would be the second highest point on the circuit.

■ Another beautiful passage could be along a 4.6-mile stretch of the former Massachusetts Bay Transportation Authority rail line between Easton and West Bridgewater and off Route 106 in Easton.

"It's certainly a place we've had our eye on," said Alan French, chairman of the Bay Circuit Alliance.

The trail would pass a golf course and pastoral stretches of farmland. The alternatives would be to cross a bog and several wetlands if the MBTA decides to reactivate the rail line in the future, French said.

■ Having picnic lunches along the Bay Circuit Trail is a real treat, and if West Bridgewater's War Memorial Park ever becomes an official part of the trail, it will be a nice place to stop. The park has several wooden bridges with benches overlooking the Satucket River.

■ Along the Satucket River, there is a well-marked section of Bay Circuit Trail just recently opened to the public. Off Route 106 in East Bridgewater, it is a peaceful sanctuary of trees and land that abuts cranberry bogs. Here, the chirping of birds replaces the roar of cars on the nearby road.

■ One of the true gems along the Bay Circuit is Bay Farm in Kingston and Duxbury. As one of the first stretches of land to officially become part of the trail in 1990, it is an important milestone that also has a beautiful view of Kingston Bay and the Duxbury coastline.

Bay Circuit supporters will be celebrating a fall foliage fiesta at the farm's southern end in Duxbury on Oct. 19 at 1 p.m. The public is invited to attend and learn more about the trail.

For more information or direction to local trails, here are some contacts:

The Bay Circuit Alliance headquarters in Andover: Alan French, (978) 470-1982. World Wide Web address: <http://www.serve.com/baycircuit>

Duxbury: John Joline, (781) 934-2531.

East Bridgewater: Jeff Luttazi, (508) 378-9431.

Kingston: Robert Mulliken, (781) 585-2743.

Pembroke: Susan Lemish, (781) 826-1287.

Walpole: Walpole Recreation Department, (508) 660-7855.

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